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Briefing Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives

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COMPUTER SYSTEMS

Overview of Federal Systems for Processing Aliens Seeking U.S. Entry

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Information Management and
Technology Division

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September 9, 1988

The Honorable Don Edwards
Chairman, Subcommittee on Civil
and Constitutional Rights
Committee on the Judiciary
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This report, in the form of slides and narrative, documents a June 15, 1988, briefing we provided staff members of your Subcommittee. The purpose of the briefing was to provide information that we had obtained on automated systems being used by the Department of State, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the U.S. Customs Service for processing aliens seeking entry into the United States. As agreed with your office, our briefing included a general description of the systems in terms of their purpose, content, operation, and cost.

State, INS, and Customs have responsibilities for processing aliens for entry to the United States. During fiscal year 1987, these agencies collectively processed more than 200 million aliens. Each agency uses its own automated system (known as a lookout system) to carry out its processing responsibilities. At diplomatic and consular posts, State personnel use the Automated Visa Lookout System to process visa applications. At ports of entry, INS inspectors use the National Automated Immigration Lookout System and Customs inspectors use the Treasury Enforcement Communications System II to clear individuals and their possessions for entry to the United States. Detailed information on these systems is contained in appendixes I and II.

The three lookout systems share common purposes. Generally, they are intended to help screen out certain individuals whose presence in this country would be undesirable. To facilitate this screening process, these systems maintain records on millions of individuals who may not be eligible or legally entitled to admission to the United States. Information pertaining to aliens seeking to come to the United States is entered into these systems and compared against the data base records that are maintained by each agency. Agency officials use the results of these

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comparisons in helping them decide whether or not to issue visas or grant entry to individuals along with their possessions.

The costs of INS' lookout system for fiscal year 1987 amounted to $2.8 million. According to a State budget official, costs for their automated data processing system are included in various program activity budgets and are not separately identified by system. Since Customs' lookout system became operational in fiscal year 1988, only projected costs for the system's lookout-related activities were available for that year. These projected costs for fiscal year 1988 amount to $8.3 million.

In obtaining information for this briefing, we met with officials at each agency's headquarters and at various field locations. We reviewed documentation and visited a consular post and several air, land, and sea ports of entry to observe these systems in operation. Port of entry and agency locations we visited are identified in appendix III.

As part of our review, we discussed the information contained in this report with responsible agency officials and have incorporated their views where appropriate. As requested by your office, further distribution of this report will not be made until 30 days after the date of this letter or until you release it, whichever comes first. If you have any questions about this report, please call me on 275-3455.

Sincerely yours,

Ralph V. Carlone

Ralph V. Carlone
Director

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ABBREVIATIONS

AVLOS	Automated Visa Lookout System
GAO	General Accounting Office
IMTEC	Information Management and Technology Division
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
NAILS	National Automated Immigration Lookout System
TECS II	Treasury Enforcement Communications System II

Briefing on Ports of Entry
Automated Lookout Systems

Federal Agencies Processing Aliens for Entry to the United States

- Department of State:
  - -- Grants/denies visas to aliens requesting entry to the United States
- INS, Department of Justice:
  - -- Grants/denies entry to aliens
- U.S. Customs Service, Department of the Treasury:
  - -- Grants/denies clearance to aliens along with their possessions

FEDERAL AGENCIES PROCESSING ALIENS FOR ENTRY TO THE UNITED STATES

The Department of State; Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Department of Justice; and the U.S. Customs Service, Department of the Treasury have, among other things, primary responsibility for processing individuals for entry to the United States.

State's Bureau of Consular Affairs grants or denies visas to aliens seeking temporary visits or permanent residence in the United States. State processes visa applications through more than 240 diplomatic and consular posts (known collectively as consular posts).

INS grants or denies entry to aliens through on-site inspections and examinations performed at about 610 INS ports of entry.[1]

Customs grants or denies clearance to aliens along with their possessions at the 292 Customs ports of entry.[1] Customs inspectors also assess and collect duties, excise taxes, fees, and penalties due on imported goods.

To assist these agencies in carrying out their responsibilities, each has developed its own automated system known as a "lookout" system. At consular posts, State personnel use the Automated Visa Lookout System (AVLOS) to assist them in processing visa applications. At ports of entry, INS inspectors use the National Automated Immigration Lookout System (NAILS) and Customs inspectors use the Treasury Enforcement Communications System II (TECS II) to assist them in clearing individuals and their possessions for entry to the United States.

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[1]Customs and INS define ports of entry differently. INS defines them by specific inspection location, whereas Customs defines them by geographic area. INS identifies 610 ports of entry and Customs identifies 292 ports of entry that include over 600 air, land border, and sea inspection locations.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

- Objective:
  - -- To obtain information on ports of entry automated lookout systems regarding purpose, content, operation, and cost
- Scope:
  - -- Lookout systems operated by State, INS, and Customs and their uses in support of the inspection process
- Methodology:
  - -- Reviewed systems documentation and operations at selected locations
  - -- Discussed systems content, operation, purpose, and cost with managers and users

OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

As agreed with your office, the objective of our review was to obtain information on ports of entry automated lookout systems, including their purpose, content, operation, and cost. Our work on this assignment focused on State's AVLOS,[2] INS' NAILS, and Customs' TECS II system.

We conducted our work from October 1987 through July 1988. Our work included reviewing systems documentation such as user manuals and work load data. In addition to discussing these systems with each agency's headquarters and field officials, we visited a consular post and several air, land, and sea ports of entry to observe the operation of these systems. The locations we visited are listed in appendix III.

Views of responsible agency officials on the material contained in this report were obtained and incorporated where appropriate. Our work was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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[2]We included AVLOS in our study because this system represents the starting point for lookout activities relating to aliens seeking entry into the United States.

Requests and Inspections Fiscal Year 1987 Work Load (in millions)	
• Requests for U.S. visas	9.2 (est.)
• Aliens inspected by INS	204
• Citizens and aliens examined by Customs	310

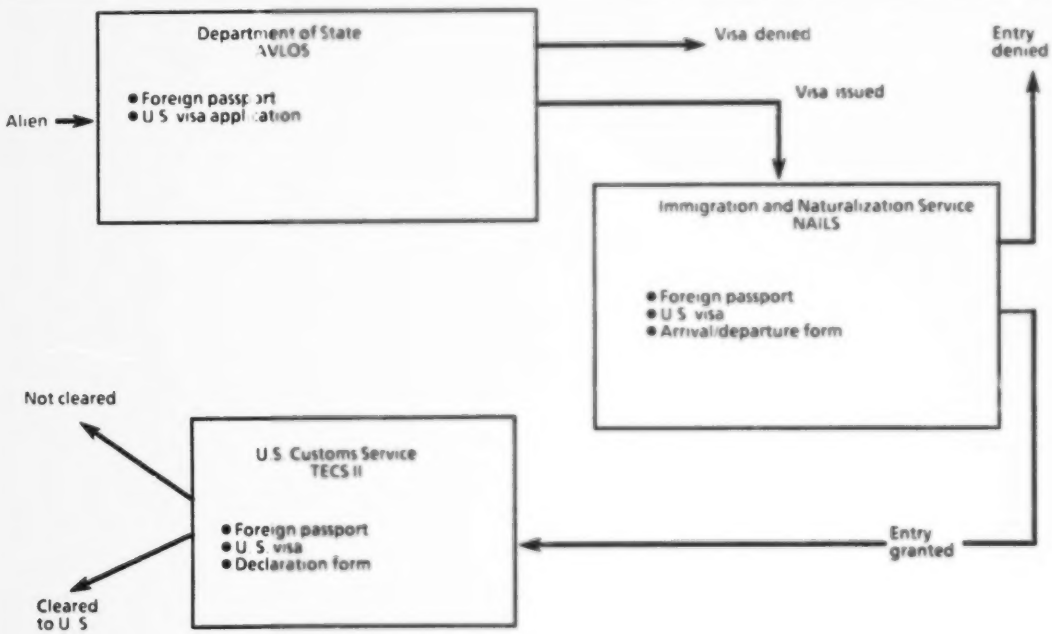
REQUESTS AND INSPECTIONS
FISCAL YEAR 1987 WORK LOAD

Work load information showed that during fiscal year 1987, State reviewed an estimated 9.2 million visa applications. Once issued, visas remain valid for varying lengths of time ranging from 1 day to an indefinite period. Generally, visa holders can use these documents more than once to enter the United States.

INS' statistics showed for fiscal year 1987 that about 204 million aliens were inspected for admission at ports of entry. For the same period, Customs reported inspections of about 310 million individuals.[3]

[3]Customs does not maintain separate statistics on the number of aliens and U.S. citizens inspected.

Inspection and Examination Process (Air Port of Entry)



INSPECTION AND EXAMINATION PROCESS
(AIR PORT OF ENTRY)

To provide an understanding of each agency's role and use of a lookout system, we cite as an example an alien requesting a visa through State and being processed for admission to the United States at an air port of entry where INS and Customs functions are performed independently. These systems are described in greater detail in subsequent sections of this appendix.

In our example, the admission process begins when an alien applies for a visa. At a U.S. consular post, the alien submits a visa application along with a foreign passport and other documentation. During processing of the visa application, the consular official checks the alien's name against the AVLOS data base in determining visa eligibility. At consular posts where automated access to AVLOS is not available, State personnel use AVLOS microfiche records to perform the lookout check.

Once an application is approved, a visa is issued giving the alien the right to officially request admission to the United States. If the application is denied for any reason, such as fraud or misrepresentation, the AVLOS data base is updated with the denial information for future reference.

Upon arriving at an air port of entry, the alien presents a foreign passport, U.S. visa, and arrival/departure form to an INS inspector. The inspector reviews this documentation for appropriateness and checks the alien's name against the NAILS data base. At those air ports of entry where automated access to NAILS is not available, the inspector checks a printed version of NAILS. This version, commonly called the Service Lookout Book, is a subset of the NAILS data base consisting of about 40,000 of the 1 million NAILS records.

Once the alien is determined to be admissible, the proper entry stamps are placed in the alien's passport and that individual is then officially in the United States. If it is determined that the alien is inadmissible for any reason--for example, not being in possession of a valid passport--the alien may return to the point of departure or request a hearing before an immigration judge.

Following INS' inspection, the alien takes all luggage and proceeds to a Customs checkpoint. The Customs inspector reviews the alien's travel documentation, including passport, visa, and declaration form, which is used to disclose personal items and their value. The inspector checks the alien's name against the TECS II data base for any prior Customs violations. Where automated access to TECS II is not available, the inspector

relies on interviews, observations, and/or physical inspections in clearing individuals and their possessions. If the inspector determines that the alien should be cleared, then that individual is allowed to proceed through the Customs' checkpoint with his/her luggage and other possessions. If an alien is not cleared for any reason--for example, prior law violations--then that individual is detained until the situation is resolved. Such resolution could include arrest by Customs inspectors or other law enforcement authorities. Customs inspectors may also levy fees and fines on an alien for possessions that exceed the U.S. duty-free limits.

APPENDIX I

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Automated Visa Lookout System (AVLOS)

- AVLOS is:
  - -- A computerized data matching system
  - -- Used in determining visa eligibility and identifying persons of interest to other agencies
- AVLOS contains:
  - -- A data file with about 2 million records
  - -- Data elements that include:
    - Name, date and place of birth, and aliases
    - Reason for record creation
    - Location and date of record creation
    - Comment field

AUTOMATED VISA LOOKOUT SYSTEM (AVLOS)

AVLOS is a computerized data matching system used by consular post personnel to determine visa eligibility and to identify persons of interest to other agencies. The system electronically checks information entered by consular personnel against existing files for potential data matches. AVLOS began initial operations in 1966 and is presently available at about 90 of the more than 240 consular posts located throughout the world.[4] According to officials in State's Information Systems Office, the system currently processes an estimated 1 million transactions monthly and has about 200 terminals regularly accessing the system located at various passport offices and consular posts.

The AVLOS data base consists of about 2 million visa records collected during the course of processing applications or information received from other agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration. The system also includes records received from INS and Customs.

AVLOS data files contain information on individuals who may be ineligible for visas. Ineligibility may result from previous visa denials made on the basis of fraud, or information provided by other agencies such as suspected drug trafficking.

The system files contain information such as name, aliases used, date and place of birth, reason for record creation, location and date of record entry. In addition, a comment field is available for the entry of other information such as identifying various reasons why a visa should be denied.

State shares AVLOS lookout records in the form of a computer tape with both INS and Customs. INS and Customs include these records in NAILS and TECS II to assist inspectors in identifying persons who have previously been denied visas by State.

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[4]AVLOS is also used by State personnel at consular posts and at 14 domestic passport offices to determine U.S. passport eligibility.

How AVLOS Works

- AVLOS is a centralized system that:
  - -- Provides on-line access to consular posts
  - -- Automatically ranks potential matches against input
  - -- Produces potential data matches

HOW AVLOS WORKS

AVLOS is operated centrally out of State's data processing center in Washington, D.C., and provides 24-hours a day, 6 days a week, on-line access to about 90 consular posts. In reviewing a visa application, consular personnel enter applicant data such as name and date of birth into the system through terminals at their location. The system automatically checks this information against its data files for a match. When several potential matches occur, AVLOS automatically ranks them according to the most likely match and returns the data to the query terminal. State personnel evaluate the response in adjudicating the visa application.

About 150 consular posts that do not have automated access to the system use a microfiche version of the data files in reviewing visa applications. The microfiche version also serves as a backup to the computerized system in the event of system failure.

National Automated Immigration Lookout System (NAILS)

- **NAILS is:**

  -- **A computerized data matching system**

  -- **Used in determining admissibility and identifying persons of interest to other law enforcement agencies**

- **NAILS contains:**

  -- **A data file with approximately 1 million records**

  -- **Data elements that include:**

  Name, date of birth, and nationality
  Reason for record creation
  Alias indicator
  Passport number
  Record creation and cancellation dates
  Soundex code
  Comment field

NATIONAL AUTOMATED IMMIGRATION LOOKOUT SYSTEM (NAILS)

NAILS is a computerized data matching system used by INS inspectors to determine the admissibility of aliens seeking entry to the United States and to identify individuals of interest to other law enforcement agencies. The system electronically checks information entered by INS personnel against existing files for potential data matches. NAILS became operational in 1983 and is presently available at 44 of the 610 ports of entry. Currently, the system processes an estimated 372,000 transactions monthly and has about 280 terminals located at ports of entry.

The NAILS data base consists of about 1 million records. These records contain information originating within INS such as names of individuals whose alien identification cards have been lost or stolen. The system also includes information received from other agencies such as State records that identify aliens who have been previously denied visas and Drug Enforcement Administration records that identify individuals suspected of criminal drug activity.

The system files contain information such as name, date of birth, nationality, reason for record creation, passport number, and record creation and cancellation date. The system also contains a soundex code that is a four character arrangement used to search for similar sounding last names, and a comment field that is used for entering additional information such as the reason the individual was deported.

INS shares NAILS lookout records in the form of a computer tape with both State and Customs. This data sharing allows State and Customs to include INS data in the AVLOS and TECS II systems.

How NAILS Works

- NAILS is a centralized system that:
  - -- Provides on-line access at ports of entry
  - -- Performs exact and soundex name searches
  - -- Produces potential data matches

HOW NAILS WORKS

NAILS is operated centrally out of the Department of Justice Data Processing Center in Dallas, Texas, and provides about 24-hours a day, 7 days a week on-line access to 44 ports of entry, INS headquarters and field offices. In addition, personnel from certain federal agencies, including the FBI and State, can access the system to perform lookout checks.

While inspecting an alien's documentation for entry, INS inspectors enter document data, such as name and date of birth, into the system through terminals located at various ports of entry. Inspectors have the option of performing exact name searches or soundex code searches. A soundex code search converts an individual's last name to alpha-numeric representations for searches of similar sounding last names. The system produces potential data matches and returns names to the query terminal. INS inspectors evaluate the response by comparing the potential data matches to the documentation submitted by the alien and by asking questions.

The 566 ports of entry that do not have automated access to the system have a Service Lookout Book available. This book is a subset of the NAILS data base consisting of about 40,000 of the 1 million lookout records. The Service Lookout Book also serves as a backup to the computerized system in the event of system failure.

Treasury Enforcement Communications System (TECS II)

- TECS II is:
  - -- A computerized data matching system
  - -- Used to support law enforcement activities
- TECS II contains:
  - -- Approximately 86 million inspection records including 84 million history records and 2 million lookout records
  - -- Data elements that include:
    - Name, address, date of birth, and aliases
    - Passport and Social Security numbers
    - Biographical data
    - Arrest data (Customs' records)
    - Vehicle information

TREASURY ENFORCEMENT COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM (TECS II)

TECS II is a computerized data matching system used by Customs inspectors to determine whether an alien has committed previous violations of Customs laws or is of interest to other law enforcement agencies. The system electronically checks information entered by Customs personnel against existing files for potential data matches. TECS II began initial operations in October 1987 as the successor to the original TECS system. According to the Acting Director for Law Enforcement Systems, TECS II is presently available at about 212 of the 292 ports of entry. The system currently processes about 6 million transactions monthly and has about 1,100 terminals located at ports of entry.

The system's data base consists of approximately 86 million inspection records that include about 84 million history records and 2 million lookout records. History records are automatically created when an individual's name or vehicle license plate number is entered into the system. Vehicle license plate numbers are usually entered by Customs inspectors at land border inspection locations. The 2 million inspection lookout records include those created by Customs activities such as records identifying known Customs law violators, and information received from other agencies such as Drug Enforcement Administration records identifying individuals suspected of criminal drug activity. The system also includes lookout records received from State's AVLOS and INS' NAILS systems.

The system files contain information such as name, aliases used, date of birth, address, passport and Social Security numbers, biographical data, and data on previous arrests made by Customs agents. The data files also include vehicle information such as license plate and vehicle identification numbers.

TECS II has a much larger data base than either AVLOS or NAILS. Although the system supports lookout processing similar to that performed by State and INS, TECS II also supports processing for other Customs activities such as smuggling investigations and intelligence gathering functions. Customs shares lookout data with State through the manual transmission of individual records. According to Customs officials, Customs does not send lookout data to INS because INS staff has access to TECS II at INS headquarters offices and various ports of entry.

How TECS II Works

- TECS II is a centralized system that:
  - -- Provides on-line access at ports of entry
  - -- Automatically prioritizes data matches against input
  - -- Produces potential data matches

HOW TECS II WORKS

TECS II is operated centrally out of Customs' data center in Newington, Virginia, and provides 24-hours a day, 7 days a week on-line access to about 212 ports of entry. In performing the clearance function of individuals and their possessions, Customs inspectors enter document data such as name and date of birth into the system through terminals located at the various ports of entry. Inspectors use the system to perform exact name or soundex searches of the data base. When several potential matches occur, the system automatically ranks them in a prioritized order according to the severity of the reason for the lookout and returns the data to the query terminal.

At the approximately 80 ports of entry that do not have automated access to the system, inspectors do not check lookout records. Instead, they clear individuals and their possessions on the basis of interviews, observations, and/or physical inspections. Unlike AVLOS and NAILS, TECS II appears on screen only. It is not placed on microfiche or printouts.

Lookout Systems Fiscal Year Costs

- AVLOS - cost data not maintained
- NAILS - $2.8 million for fiscal year 1987
- TECS II - $8.3 million estimated for fiscal year 1988

LOOKOUT SYSTEMS FISCAL YEAR COSTS

According to a State budget official, costs for their automated data processing system are included in various program activity budgets and are not separately identified by system. For INS' lookout system, costs for fiscal year 1987 amounted to $2.8 million. Since TECS II became operational in January 1988, only projected costs for the system's lookout-related activities were available for fiscal year 1988. These projected costs amounted to $8.3 million.

The INS outlay of $2.8 million included $1.6 million for NAILS equipment acquisition and telecommunications and approximately $1.2 million for system operations, software development, and maintenance. INS projects NAILS' fiscal year 1988 costs at $3.6 million.

Since TECS II became operational in October 1988, there were no fiscal year 1987 operational costs. However, Customs estimates a fiscal year 1988 total system outlay of $35 million. This includes $8.3 million for TECS II lookout-related activities and approximately $26.7 million in costs associated with developing, implementing, and operating other activities supported by the system. These activities include investigation and intelligence gathering functions. The Customs outlay of $8.3 million for TECS II lookout activities includes $5.2 million for telecommunications, $2.6 million for equipment acquisition and leasing, $250,000 for development and maintenance, and $250,000 for user training and support.

Lookout Systems Characteristics

	AVLOS	NAILS	TECS II
Data base records (in millions)	2	1	2
Monthly transactions (in millions)	1[a]	.37	6
Number of accessing terminals	200	280	1,100
Locations with automated access	104[b]	44[c]	212[c]
Locations without automated access	150	566[c]	80[c]

[a]Includes visa and passport transactions.
[b]Includes 90 consular posts and 14 passport offices.
[c]Customs and INS define ports of entry differently. INS defines them by specific inspection location whereas Customs defines them by geographic area. INS identifies 610 ports of entry and Customs identifies 292 ports of entry that include over 600 air, land border and sea inspection locations.

Agency and Port of Entry Locations
Visited During This Assignment

Location	State	INS	Customs
Headquarters, Washington, D.C.	X	X	X
District Office, Los Angeles, CA			X
District Office, San Diego, CA		X	
Pacific Regional Office, Los Angeles, CA			X
Customs Data Center, Newington, VA			X
U.S. Consular Post, Tijuana, Mexico	X		
Los Angeles International Airport		X	X
San Francisco International Airport		X	X
Dulles International Airport, VA		X	X
Port of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA		X	X
Port of Entry, San Ysidro, CA		X	X

Note: We also drew upon previous audit work where we observed INS port of entry operations at three other airports including Baltimore/Washington International Airport; John F. Kennedy International Airport, New York; and Newark International Airport, Newark, NJ.
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